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SUBJECT: VEILED WOMAN BREAKS BARRIERS TO RUN IN TRIBAL
ELECTION

REF: KUWAIT 505

Sensitive But Unclassified; Not for Internet Distribution.

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Zakiyya Thuwaini has announced her candidacy in local elections scheduled for April 30 in Kuwait's most conservative area. She has faced opposition from within her own family, but others in the community have encouraged her and women's activists from around the country are assisting her in her campaign. If she wins, she will be the first woman elected to public office in Kuwait's history.
End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Zakiyya Thuwaini, appearing in a black veil that only exposed her eyes, held a press conference to announce her candidacy for the April 30 public elections to the board of directors for the Naseem Cooperative Society in the city of Jahra. (Note: Most neighborhoods have one or more "co-ops," which are small shopping centers anchored by grocery stores and mosques. The co-ops use the profits from the shopping centers to finance community activities. Jahra, located approximately 35 miles west of Kuwait City, is Kuwait's most socially conservative area. End Note.) Women's activists told visiting Representative Loretta Sanchez (D-CA) on April 7 that the very fact that a woman would run for elections there was a major development (reftel). The activists told Sanchez that Thuwaini had long been valued by male candidates as someone who enjoyed an excellent reputation and was able to mobilize voters for them in Co-op elections. Thuwaini came to the realization, they said, that with her connections and influence, she herself could win in the elections.

¶3. (SBU) Several women from tribal districts ran during parliamentary elections in 2006. Some of them faced significant opposition with one of them, Alia Al-Enezi, dropping out because of death threats from within her own extended family. Thuwaini told PolAssistant on April 9 that her family had strongly opposed her candidacy because it was inappropriate for a woman to sit in meetings with a group of men. But Thuwaini insisted it was important to have women involved in the Co-ops because women manage the household and groceries and therefore understand better how the co-ops should improve their services. Thuwaini said that she had received congratulations and encouragement from many men as well as women and is confident that she will win a seat on the board.

¶4. (U) If Thuwaini wins the election, she will be the first woman to win public office. Women's activists have taken up her cause. Two of Kuwait's leading liberal women's activists, Dr. Rola Dashti and lawyer Kawthar Al-Jaw'an, called Thuwaini and asked to participate in her press conference when they learned she was running in the elections. Thuwaini told PolAssistant she was grateful for

their participation, which had raised her campaign's profile.

Meanwhile, the liberal women activists have been searching unsuccessfully for ways to reach women in outlying, tribal areas, and hope Thuwaini's campaign will provide an entree into the tribal areas.

15. (U) Bio Note: Thuwaini has worked as a nurse since 1977 and is currently the head nurse at Jahra hospital.

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